

Balancing Professional Passions: The Exemplary Path of Deil Wright's Life

Brendan Burke

As the twentieth century ended, many fields of endeavor engaged in self-reflection, considering their achievements over the previous 100 years. Various organizations compiled lists, identifying their greatest successes of the century. The American Film Institute cited *Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca*, and *Schindler's List* among its "100 Greatest Movies." The Modern Library Association placed *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Catch-22* near the top of its "100 Best Novels" for the period.

Public administration did not produce a list of its most enduring and powerful works. But in the fifty-four book excerpts and articles included in Shafritz and Hyde's *Classics of Public Administration*, the field has a relatively widely accepted indicator of its best offerings.¹ Happily, the work of one of UNC Chapel Hill's own appears in all recent editions of the *Classics*: a portion of Deil Wright's *Understanding Intergovernmental Relations*.

At the close of the twentieth century, the American Society of Public Administration recognized Wright with two of its most prestigious awards:

- The Dwight Waldo Award, for career contributions to the literature of public administration. In this achievement, Wright joined the likes of Aaron Wildavsky, Herbert Kaufman, and Herbert Simon.
- The 1999 William E. and Frederick C. Mosher Award, with coauthors Jeffrey Brudney and F. Ted Hebert, for the best paper by academics in *Public Administration Review*.²

Early in the twenty-first century, the accolades for Wright are moving in a



new and highly appropriate direction. At its 2001 annual conference, the UNC Chapel Hill Master of Public Administration (M.P.A.) Alumni Association honored Wright for his career and service. The full measure of a public administration scholar is to be highly favored by his or her academic peers, as well as by the successful public servants who have sat in his or her classroom. My own recent experience as a teacher in an M.P.A. program five hundred miles removed from Chapel Hill has shown me that Wright's work has been significant in the advancement of government professionals across the nation and the world. Two examples already stand out for me.

Mark Cowell made a mid-career change from being an attorney to man-

aging a program for the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. He also began studying for an M.P.A., but the transition was not easy. "Those first readings [in *Introduction to Public Administration*] didn't really impress me," he said. "The papers seemed too obvious or too circuitous. But when we got to the Federalism/Intergovernmental Relations section, Deil Wright's essay was the first thing that made sense of my complex situation and that would help me with my work."

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NON-U.S. CITIES WHERE DEIL WRIGHT HAS TAUGHT OR LECTURED

Dublin, Ireland
Swansea, Wales
London, England
Basel, Switzerland
Berne, Switzerland
Duisburg, West Germany
Nuremburg, West Germany
West Berlin, West Germany
East Berlin, East Germany
Madrid, Spain
Trieste, Italy
Bangkok, Thailand
Chejudo, South Korea
Seoul, South Korea
Taegu, South Korea
Fukuoka, Japan
Kobe, Japan
Kyoto, Japan
Naha, Japan
Osaka, Japan
Sapporo, Japan
Tokyo, Japan
Jakarta, Indonesia
Jogjakarta, Indonesia
Ife, Nigeria
Melbourne, Australia
Perth, Australia

Sue Keenan, a property manager for a nonprofit community action agency outside Boston, experienced something similar. Her work environment involves several governmental regulatory agencies, several overlapping political processes, court-ordered mandates, and the lack of a coherent mission—the substance of about four chapters of *Understanding Intergovernmental Relations*. She too has been able to make more sense of a confusing intergovernmental environment because of Wright's writings.

Wright's Journey

Wright's life serves as an example of the way for a professor to promote his scholarly ideas and to influence the world of public administration. In 1948 he went from a small town in Michigan to the state's flagship university in Ann Arbor. Early in his academic career, he aspired to become a city manager. Nine years later, he held a B.A., an M.P.A., and a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan; had performed several grant-funded community studies around the state; had published his first article in *Public Administration Review*; and had served as an instructor at both the University of Michigan and Wayne State University, in Detroit. From the outset he found a place in academe but with steady involvement in the workings and the issues of local governments.

By the early 1960s, Wright had published an assortment of articles and several books, moving on a fast track toward tenure at the University of Iowa. As if this were not a sufficient contribution, he continued his consulting work with communities and regional commissions in Ohio and Pennsylvania, supported a tax study for the Michigan legislature, and served in research institutes in Iowa and at the University of California, Berkeley.

While at the University of Iowa, Wright started a major project that will serve as a lasting contribution to professionals' understanding of state government officials. He began his research on American state administrative officials with a grant from the Relm Foundation. This effort later became the American State Administrators Project, ASAP for short. This lengthy survey of all state agency heads throughout the country (approximately 3,600 possible respondents) probes their backgrounds, policy stances, and working environments. The ASAP data have been collected twice every decade since the 1960s with the ongoing financial backing of the Earhart Foundation. The survey results form an important longitudinal source on change in the American states, with data on nearly 10,000 state agency heads.

Wright, his wife, Pat, and their four children came to Chapel Hill in 1967, he as a full professor at UNC Chapel

Hill. From there, his career diversified. He continued his work with the ASAP survey, taught undergraduate and doctoral students, and wrote about public finance. But he also pursued several new challenges. He started working with the fledgling UNC Chapel Hill M.P.A. Program. He became an important name in the study of intergovernmental relations, and the topic began to turn up in his writings more frequently at that time.

Further, he began a period of high-level political and policy involvement. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, he served as an adviser to Richard Nixon before the Nixon presidency and also to North Carolina Governor James Holshouser. He spoke about revenue-sharing policy before U.S. House committees on two occasions. His consulting work was of national prominence. In advisory roles he consulted with the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, the Brookings Institution, and the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. He also served as an official member of the Director's Advisory Committee of the National Institutes of Health, the North Carolina Council on Goals and Policies, and the North Carolina State Internship Council. In 1975 he was elected to the National Academy of Public Administration and has served that prestigious organization in several capacities. Along the way, he had time for his family, golf, softball, UNC Chapel Hill basketball, and ongoing service to the Rotary Club.

How could Wright top the services he had performed in the early 1970s? By becoming a leader of two professional organizations; by carrying his teachings and ideas about intergovernmental relations to other nations; and by writing the first edition of what is arguably the leading text in intergovernmental relations. Wright served as director of the M.P.A. Program at UNC Chapel Hill from 1973 to 1980, when the program educated some of its most successful graduates. Immediately afterward, he served as president of the Southern Political Science Association.

Starting in the 1970s, Wright traveled to more than a dozen countries to lecture on intergovernmental relations (see the sidebar, this page), and to



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many American states as part of programs sponsored by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and other agencies. *Understanding Intergovernmental Relations* was not his first or last book.³ But its three editions stand out for the kind of work that he always has pursued in the classroom: effective, creative synthesis and conceptualization of the complex theory and activity of decentralized governance.

Y2K and Wright

Wright did not slow his pace in the 1980s and 1990s. This brief description leaves out countless activities, including editorial stints for many major political science journals and two prestigious visiting professorships. It names only one of the numerous books and one of the many articles he wrote during five decades of professional service. It does not give credit to dozens of co-authors, nor does it reflect the appreciation that those coauthors felt for working with Wright. But four endeavors that thrive into the new century need to be described to help the reader understand Wright's current influence on the academic and practical side of public administration.

What began as a few lectures in Japan and Korea in the 1970s has turned into an ongoing effort to enhance the two countries' administrative capabilities. Not only has Wright traveled to the Far East to teach at Yonsei University in Korea, Meiji University in Japan, and several other schools in these countries, but he has been influential in bringing many Far Eastern scholars, especially Koreans, to UNC Chapel Hill to study public administration. His UNC Chapel Hill students in more advanced courses may find themselves sitting with the full range of Korean government participants, from activists to conservative high-level officials. Three times during the 1990s, Wright organized international forums to study global governance, enabling American, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Australian public administrators to share ideas and learn from one another.⁴

Occasionally, UNC Chapel Hill M.P.A. students find a different kind of student in the room with them—a Ph.D.



The Wright family at the 2001 M.P.A. Alumni Association celebration. Seated: Deil and Pat (wife). Standing, left to right: Matthew (son), Susan (daughter-in-law), Mark (son), David (son), Pam (Lois's partner), and Lois (daughter). Missing: Merri (daughter-in-law) and Lindsey (granddaughter).

student from the Political Science Department. Since the 1960s, Wright has trained a number of capable public administration professors. A sampling of the Ph.D. candidates he supervised at UNC Chapel Hill, one from each of the four decades, includes Nelson Dome-trius, who has been influential in the M.P.A. program at Texas Tech University (Lubbock) and has served as the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences there; Elaine Sharp, a leader of the University of Kansas's M.P.A. program; Carol Weissert, director of Michigan State University's Institute of Public Policy and Social Research and an M.P.A. faculty member; and Cynthia Bowling, a recent graduate who already has been director of the Auburn University (Alabama) M.P.A. program. Wright helps his Ph.D. students succeed not only by teaching them well but by supporting their efforts to obtain fellowships, opening up the ASAP data set for use toward dissertations and other papers, and collaborating on articles for publication.

One of the most heated debates in public administration during the 1990s revolved around the suitability of the "reinventing government" model. Although prominent scholars debated whether the model could or should

work, and whether its philosophical base was superior or inferior to pre-existing public administration theory, Wright was one of the first to move into the practical realm, asking the question, Who is actually pursuing the model? The ASAP surveys in 1994 and 1998 included questions about the extent of implementation of various aspects of reinvention. Jeffrey Brudney, F. Ted Hebert, and Wright gave us the earliest and most comprehensive understanding of the implementation of these new reforms. They found that reinvention was just getting under way at the state level in 1994, but by 1998 many states were actively implementing a number of the ideas from Osborne and Gaebler's *Reinventing Government* and Vice President Al Gore's National Performance Review.⁵

The trend toward "devolution," or movement of power from the national level to the American states, was overstated during the late 1990s, except possibly in welfare reform. But another major trend in that decade went largely unreported: cost-cutting conservatives dismantled several important national policy resources, including the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations and the Office of Technology Assessment. With less capability for

policy analysis at the national level, academics had to assess the effectiveness of the new welfare model. The leader of the “devolved” effort to study welfare reform was Richard Nathan, of the Rockefeller Institute, but Wright was part of the team to help study variation in reform across the states. North Carolina has implemented one of the most innovative welfare reforms by devolving policy choices to the county level. Along with social work professor Phil Cooke and with Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation support, Wright formed a team of twelve public administration scholars around the state to study the variation in county implementation strategies and successes. The Tracking Responses to Welfare Reform survey results are just coming out (see the project’s Web site, www.unc.edu/depts/welfare).

A Living Model for Academics and Practitioners

Since one of Wright’s greatest skills is synthesis of detail, a small summary of his qualities to which others might aspire follows:

- **Ability and versatility.** Ferrell Heady noticed these characteristics in Wright early in his undergraduate career at the University of Michigan. Heady taught Wright in the Introduction to Public Administration course in 1950, lost track of him while Wright pursued his M.P.A., but then was part of Wright’s dissertation committee. He has enjoyed following Wright’s successful career. Heady was one of the first scholars of comparative public administration and saw his student follow with the Korea-Japan-America linkage.
- **Long hours.** That Wright works long hours should be clear from this article, but here is one other personal observation. A person who collaborates with him on a paper or a project can expect some 10 P.M. phone calls to work out the details.
- **Sense of humor.** Wright is not all work and no play. He enjoys himself while teaching or pursuing research and makes the classroom amusing with metaphors, allegories, and

jokes. One specific: When a leading academic is chosen as the president of a political science association, he or she has an opportunity to speak to the profession about the state of the field, rational choice theory, reinventing government, or some other serious topic. When Wright made his presidential address to the Southern Political Science Association, he gave forth eloquently and passionately about—golf.

- **Personal generosity.** Wright is not a rich man, but he has opened his house and his wallet to the UNC Chapel Hill M.P.A. Program and to Korean students over time. Witness the Hayman-Howard-Wright Endowment and the M.P.A. Program’s annual student award for Best Capstone Paper, two ways in which Deil supports student achievement out of his own pocket. Many UNC Chapel Hill students have known the way to Wright’s house, to attend picnics and courses there in a setting far more pleasant than the dreary classrooms of Hamilton Hall.
- **Enduring personal ties.** Wright will stick to you like glue. He met Ferrell Heady in about 1950, when Heady was just starting as a professor at the University of Michigan and Wright was about twenty. Since then, each has made a large impact on public administration (Heady was the president of the University of New Mexico for several years). They continue a strong friendship, traveling to Mexico together in 2001 in conjunction with a public administration conference. Jeffrey Brudney and Wright go back three decades as collaborators and friends. F. Ted Hebert was a graduate student of Wright’s at the University of Iowa. The two men had a four-decade-long professional relationship and friendship. Sadly, Hebert did not outlive his teacher, passing away early in 2001.

The preceding traits are ones to which any public administration practitioner or scholar might aspire. Wright is a model to other academics because he has consistently kept his work relevant to professionals in

government. The academic journals of public administration lament the “intellectual crisis,” the mismatch between the field’s theory and practice. Yet Wright has kept an appropriate focus on governmental applications, not just theoretical reinterpretations and restatements. Wright’s work with governments and agencies also serves as a model to practitioners; he teaches them to be rigorous in their efforts and to consider the various angles and aspects of the situations they face. Who else would coach them in how to drive a ten-thousand-pound marshmallow down a hill (a metaphor for the public manager guiding the American intergovernmental system)?

Notes

1. JAY M. SHAFRITZ & ALBERT C. HYDE, *CLASSICS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION* (4th ed. Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997).

2. Jeffrey L. Brudney et al., *Reinventing Government in the American States: Measuring and Explaining Administrative Reform*, 59 *PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REVIEW* 19 (Jan.–Feb. 1999).

3. DEIL S. WRIGHT, *UNDERSTANDING INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS* (3d ed. Pacific Grove, Cal.: Brooks/Cole Publ’g Co., 1988).

4. Three books have emerged from these conferences: *GLOBALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION: INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS, POLICY ISSUES, AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS IN JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES* (Jon Jun & Deil S. Wright eds., Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1996); *FUTURE CHALLENGES OF LOCAL AUTONOMY IN JAPAN, KOREA, AND THE UNITED STATES* (F. Horie & M. Nishio eds., Tokyo: National Inst. for Research Advancement, 1997); and *NATIONAL INST. FOR RESEARCH ADVANCEMENT & NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMIN., THE CHALLENGE TO NEW GOVERNANCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE CENTRAL-LOCAL RELATIONS* (Tokyo: NIRA, 1999).

5. DAVID OSBORNE & TED GAEBLER, *REINVENTING GOVERNMENT: HOW THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT IS TRANSFORMING THE PUBLIC SECTOR* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1993); AL GORE, *CREATING A GOVERNMENT THAT WORKS BETTER AND COSTS LESS: THE REPORT OF THE NATIONAL PERFORMANCE REVIEW* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1993). For a more concise treatment of the reinventing-government reform ideas, see Brudney et al., *Reinventing Government*.

